DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 977 PS 014 592

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TITLE The Rise and Fall of Modern American Childhood: Reflections on the History of Childhood in the Twentieth Century.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (68th, New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; Child Advocacy; *Child Rearing; *Children; *Child Role; Employed Women; *Family Life; Mass Media; Parent Child Relationship; Social Attitudes; *Social Change; *Social History; Sociocultural Patterns

ABSTRACT

The major theme of American childhood in the 20th century has been the rise and then the beginning decline of modern childhood. The term "modern childhood" refers to a particular constellation of adult attitudes and institutional arrangements, the heart of which is the belief that children should occupy a world of their own, separate from the world of adults. Three factors led to the rise of this idea in the 19th century: the increased preoccupation with the nature and needs of children, the belief that adulthood was becoming so complex that it required a long apprenticeship, and a family structure that gave women primary responsibility for childrearing. Much of the impetus for child welfare legislation in the first half of the 20th century came from women with genuine concern for the young. Other political and economic motives for this legislation meant that it received meager funding and produced uneven results. Modern childhood became firmly established in the child-centered suburban homes created by post World War II prosperity. The decline of modern childhood began in the 1950s and continued over the next decades due to changes in women's economic roles, the structure of families, and the mass media. (Author/CB)

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The Rise and Fall of Modern American Childhood: Reflections on the History of Childhood in the Twentieth Century

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(This paper was delivered in April, 1984 at the American Research Association, New Orleans.)

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A few years ago David Rothman observed that historians seem to take an interest in an institution just at the time when the institution is beginning to run into trouble. The history of childhood seems to provide yet another instance of that relationship. It was nearly a quarter century ago when Philippe Aries published his classic study, which set many of us on the path of research about childhood in the past, and since then the history of childhood has grown prodigiously as a discipline.[1] During that same period, however, evidence has accumulated that modern childhood, as we have known it, is heading into problems. What I wish to do in the few minutes available to me is to sketch out the notion that the major theme of American childhood in the twentieth century has been the rise and then the beginning decline of modern childhood. I wish also to suggest some of the dynamics of that rise and incipient fall, not with the thought that this will be the last word on the subject, but rather with the intent of provoking your thinking on this difficult and complex matter.[2]

By modern childhood I refer to a particular constellation of adult attitudes, expectations and institutional arrangements that have arisen since the eighteenth century and that have combined to structure the experience of increasing number of young people as they came of age. This constellation comprised many of the institutions that affected the lives of the young--the family most notably, but including also schools, the media,

the peer group and the workplace. At the heart of this constellation was the belief that children should occupy a world of their own, separate from the world of adults. Among the consequences of this belief was a transformation in family life, the rise of the school to a position as a monopoly over the ways by which the young come of age, a subordination of the peer group to adult control, an imposition of strict censorship over the mass media, the emergence of a separate literature for children, the removal of the young from the labor market, and, finally, the creation of many separate institutions for children and youth, ranging from pediatric hospitals to children's courts and prisons.

You will recognize, of course, that none of these ideas originated in the twentieth century, for the notion of modern childhood was elaborated by the nineteenth century and left as a heritage to the twentieth. Moreover, the idea of modern childhood made only slow and uneven progress through the first half of the twentieth century, and has been only imperfectly realized in the lives of many children even today. Still it can be said that children and youth of 1950 occupied a fundamentally different world than their counterparts in 1850 and that this world was more separated from the world of adults. The weakening of the modern world of childhood to which I have referred does not suggest that this world has disappeared, for it is still clearly intact,

but rather suggests that many adults are beginning to doubt that it is worth preserving and an unwilling to pay the cost of maintaining it.

In tracing the rise of modern childhood in America, we should pay careful attention to three factors especially, with the idea that if we can understand their operation we will also understand why modern childhood has begun, in the past twenty years, to unravel. The first factor had to do with the increased preoccupation by adults with the nature and needs of children, resulting in the development of a body of literature about children - fictional, didactic and scholarly. Central to this increased attention was the idea that children are really different from adults, in particular that children are innocent and vulnerable, and that this innocence and vulnerability are values to be prized. The second factor promoting modern childhood was the perception by adults that adulthood itself was becoming so complex that it required a long apprenticeship, which in turned required the postponement of commitments to the adult world of work and family. Central to this perception was the importance attached to literacy as a pre-requisite to a person's functioning as an adult. The third factor related to the structure of family life and in particular to the roles of women. The rising preoccupation with the nature and needs of childhood, the stress on the importance of shielding the young from the world of adults, and the belief that adulthood required a long and complex apprenticeship

placed an extraordinary burden on adults themselves. The nineteenth century decided that the task of protecting children, training them and monitoring their activities should fall on the shoulders of women, and, for the most part, women took up this task and made it the source of their identity. In a subtle interaction, then, these three factors combined to produce modern childhood and eventually to make it part of the experience of most American children.

The main features of modern childhood were well in place among elite families by the end of the nineteenth century; by the beginning of the twentieth century, progressive reformers were launched on a vigorous campaign to extend the modern pattern of childhood to the children of the poor--partly out of concern for the welfare of the young--and partly out of a determination to subject the working classes to the discipline of an industrial economy. Much of the energy behind this expansion of modern childhood was supplied by women, who wrote books about and for children, who enlisted in the purity crusade to ban liquor, prostitution and sensational books, who enlisted in the child study associations, who joined the mother's clubs (later the Parent Teacher Associations), who supported the kindergarten movement, and who enlisted in the causes of compulsory school attendance and the banning of child labor. The agenda for reform was clearly laid out by 1920, and the main lines of the movement for child welfare continued

during the period between the wars. Indeed, there was a steady broadening of the recognition of children's needs, and the period of the 1930's actually marked a turning point in Federal involvement in child welfare. Such New Deal programs as F.E.R.A., W.P.A., and Aid to Dependent Children clearly established precedent for the nation's responsibility as a social parent. World War Two brought additional federal involvement, by way of the Emergency Maternity and Infant Care Program and day care sponsored under the Lanham Act.

The motives behind child welfare legislation were always mixed and the results disappointingly incomplete. Although the intentions of reformers like Grace Abbott might have been pure, others supported the children's crusade for reasons other than humanitarian concern for the young. For example, the Congress that passed the legislation for Aid to Dependent Children had little interest in child welfare as such, and Congress naturally appropriated less money for children than it did for the elderly and the blind. That the nation finally get around to banning some forms of child labor had more to do with reducing competition for jobs than it did out of tender regard for the young. War time funds for maternal and infant health and for day car reflected also an over-riding concern for defense mobilization. This mixture of motives accounts in part for the fact that measures relating to child welfare received such meager funding, enjoyed only uneven results and remained infected by racism and class bias.

Aid to Dependent Children provided one of the most blatant examples. Conservative resistance to federal encroachment on states rights led Congress to leave it up to states to decide just how much money they wished to spend on poor children, and allowed states to impose humilitating means tests, with the results that states disqualified children whose mothers broke the law, were "morally unfit," or, often in the South, who were simply black. In short, many states seemed more concerned with punishing parents than with helping children. Such were the contradictions when the movement to extend the benefits of modern childhood to poor children encountered the reality of American politics in the 20th century.

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The major and unexpected triumph for modern childhood in America was realized during the period after World War Two. What the actions of social reformers--working through the state--had failed to achieve in earlier decades was brought about for millions of American children by unparalled prosperity. After fifteen years of economic deprivation and world-wide conflict, Americans had the opportunity after 1945 to establish their private utopias of family life, to populate these utopias with plenty of offspring, and to rear these children in the proper way, which is to say, in the modern way. Certainly, the central element of modern childhood, which I have identified as an emphasis on age segregation, was dramatically promoted by the suburbs which

bourgeoned on the fringes of American cities after the war. Here children were not only cut off from most adults, they were physically separated from the world of commerce and industry. In addition, the homogenous character of the suburbs meant that children living in them were shut off from contact with the very poor, the very rich, from minorities, and from the aged. In the suburbs it would seem that modern childhood had reached its apogee.

Suburban adults were also "child-centered," not in the sense that they practiced permissive child-rearing --though many did - but rather in the mere precise sense that adults were highly preoccupied with the nature and needs of their offspring - yet another feature of modern childhood. Of all reasons given by residents for moving from the city to the suburbs the most popular explanation was that the move was for the sake of the children. Wendell Bell reported in 1956 that most persons he interviewed who had moved from the city had "chosen familism as an important element in their life styles as over against career or consumership." Of one hundred respondents, Bell reported that 80 percent gave reasons having to do with bettering conditions for their children. William Whyte found that it was the children who initiated and determined the patterns of friendship among adults in Park View, Illinois. Herbert Gans noted in his study of Levittown, New Jersey, that the stress which Levittowners placed on uniformity of life-style was a product of their child-centeredness. While Levittowners could tolerate a great deal

of heterogeneity at the community level, they preferred homegeneity at the block level because it reduced the amount of conflict among neighbors ever the disciplining of children.

Further evidence that post-war Americans were child-centered may be seen in the astonishing success of Dr. Benjamin Spock's Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care. Whether residing in the suburbs or not, parents seized on this book with enthusiasm and made it the most popular book of the 20th century, next to the Bible. The book was child-centered in two ways. First, it laid out a permissive program of child-rearing - not radically so, to be sure - but a significant departure from the most popular manuals of the past. Second, and more important, Spock laid a heavy burden on parents, which was itself ironic, for he intended to write a book that would relieve parents of anxiety about child care. But while Baby and Child Care was filled with helpful advice and many reassurances - "trust yourself" Spock said - He clearly expected parents to monitor carefully their infants' developing needs and to respond sensitively to them. The task was made even more difficult in that parents were to discipline children, but in such a way as to avoid confrontation and without leaving a residue of guilt.

When Spock mentioned parents, he usually meant mothers, for post-war America reasserted the traditional belief that child-nurture was the task of women, and that they were to make it a full-time job. Considering both the high

expectations for nurture and the large number of children born after the war, it did indeed seem that women had their hands full. Reinforcing the belief in the importance of motherhood were scholars who published a series of studies calling attention to the crucial importance of mother-infant bonding. The period was also marked by a vigorous reassertion of the belief that motherhood is the chief if not sole source of a woman's identity. Modern Women: The Lost Sex appeared in 1947 and launched a strident attack on women who placed careers above motherhood. The authors drew heavly on Freudian concepts to argue that women who rejected the role of motherhood were suffering from a malady called "penis envy." Only when women purged themselves of this sickness, and only when society gave motherhood the respect it deserved, would women recover their true identity. Clearly, the war-time experiment of sending women out to work was supposed to come to an end.

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Even as modern childhood seemed near triumph in postwar America there emerged already in the 1950's signs of discontent with this arrangement, a discontent which swelled over the following two decades. One of the most significant and certainly one of the most visibile reasons for the weakening of modern childhood has to do with the changing roles of women. Even before the birth of women's liberation, women were entering the labor market in unprecedented numbers, driven either by choice or by

necessity. Most astounding was the rise of labor force participation by middle-class women, married women and mothers of young children, a rise which broke from historical patterns and defied nineteenth century notions of women's proper place. Betty Friedan, who spoke of life in the postwar suburbs with a loathing born of intimate acquaintance, provided in The Feminine Mystique an ideological rationale for the shift in female behavior. Here, she codified the nation of "women as person." Unlike some earlier versions of feminism, women's liberation rejected all claims for the moral superiority of women and couched its demands for justice in women's rights as a person, rather than on her contribution to society. Moreover, the key to a woman's identity is, or should be broader than any particular function that she performs within the family. The new ideology held that she is a person before she is a daughter, wife or mother. The evidence is that the bulk of American women did not share more radical feminist sentiments, but the actions of women also revealed that they were challenging traditional patterns of American family life. A signal that women were taking seriously new conceptions of female independence could be found, not only in increased labor force participation, but also in the rising tendency of women to postpone marriage, to have fewer children than at any point in American history, and to boost the rate of divorce to an

all-time high.

Beyond these obvious changes in women's role was a transformation in popular attitudes toward love, courtship and marriage, and, indeed, in the very conception of adulthood itself. One aspect of this transformation was the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, which introduced more Americans to new forms of sexual intimacy, both inside marriage and out, and which seemed to grant license to explore forms of sexual expression that would have shocked earlier generations. More subtle were shifts in the very meaning of adulthood. Some observers detected a decline in the motion that issues of love and work are to be settled, once and for all, at the point of transition from youth to adulthood. Instead, there was emerging a belief that all commitments--to a marriage partner, to a career, to a set of values, even to a personal identity--are tentative and subject to continuous revision throughout the course of the life cycle. The result might be, as some have predicted, the emergence of a "culture of narcissim," or, as others have maintained, a greater opportunity for a fuller and richer development of the self. This shift in attitude, most evident among young, upwardly mobile adults, meant that some adults wished to share in the benefits of modern childhood themselves.

While some scholars hastened to reassure Americans, with an impressive display of statistics, that the family was "here to stay," such reassurances seemed beside the

point. At stake was not the family itself, but rather a particular form of family life with the notion of modern childhood at its core. The unprecedented entrance of mothers into the labor force made increasingly difficult the achievement of a child-centered family life. Moreover, some feminist commentators were prepared to argue that traditional ideals of family life, especially in the forms they assumed in the immediate postwar period, had raised preoccupation with children to a level harmful both to women and to their offspring. One heard less of the dangers of neglecting children and more of the dangers of their over-protection. Women, it was argued, should spend more time in self-fulfillment and less time in trying to live their lives through their children. In any event, the rise of single parent families, usually headed by women, meant that many children were compelled by poverty and neglect to become early wise in the ways of the world.

Although changes in family life have been crucial in undermining modern childhood, it is important to understand also changes in the mass media during the postwar period. The construction of a separate world for children had required control over the mass media, which was becoming an increasingly difficult task after world war two. Part of this difficulty had to do with the collapse of censorship. Another part had to do with the fact that media moguls and advertisers were discovering that children and youth formed

a distinct and profitable market for goods and services. Almost simultaneously, for example, movies, radio and the recording industry found in teenagers the audience to replace the young children and older adults lost to television. Offered a new latitude by court decisions and desperate to find a new market, the movies provided more sensational fare, exposing teenagers to a world of sex, drugs and violence. Meanwhile radio and the recording industry discovered rock and roll, and the world of teenagers has not been the same since.

In so far as young children are concerned, the rise of television proved more significant than the other media in breaking down age segregation. To be sure, TV never has enjoyed the latitude extended to movies, but the medium itself has proved more powerful than the messages it conveys. Even in its more bland format, TV undermined modern childhood by exposing children to the secrets of the adult world. Formerly, children reared in proper families were required to learn to read before they could begin to penetrate the world of adult concerns. After 1960, however, they could find out about such things simply by turning a knob, and they could do so in their own living room. Proper parents could, of course, monitor TV watching, just as former generations of parents kept an eye on their children's choice of books and magazines. But monitoring TV has proved more difficult, and, given the changes in family life, parents seem preoccupied by other concerns, relying

in fact on the tube as a baby-sitter. Proper parents might protest, and some might unplug the set, but most seem helpless in the face of a powerful media industry. Little hindered the transformation of children into consumers, one step away from childhood innocence.

If time permitted, I might talk of pressures on the schools, generated by the cold war and the civil rights movement, to accelerate the cognitive development of children. I might also speak of development in the law, to extend adults rights to children and to remove their special, protected status. The main point is, however is clear. Changes in the economy, in the family and in the media were hurrying children away from childhood. Some were even beginning to wonder opening if age segregation itself were a good idea. It is perhaps significant and ironic that Philipps Aries, who did so much to promote the study of childhood in the past, was also one of the first to wonder if it might not have been better in the days when old and young mixed and mingled in easy sociability. We have yet to find out if Aries was right.

FOOTNOTES

1. Philippe Aries, Centuries of Chilhhood: A Social History of Family Life, translated from the French by Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

2. My thoughts are based principally on three chapters which will appear in The History of Childhood in America, to be published in 1985 by Greenwood Press, edited by Joseph Hawes and N. Ray Hiner. The chapters are "Partial Promises and Semi-Visible Youths: the Depression and World War II," by Leroy Ashby; "The Baby Boom, Prosperity and the Changing Worlds of Children, 1945-1963," by Charles Strickland and Andrew Ambrose; and "The Age of Narcissism, 1963 to 1982," by Elizabeth Douvan.